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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focused on African American and Latino high school students' perceptions of standardized admission tests, including the Scholastic Assessment Tests (I and II) and the ACT Assessment. Students enrolled in college preparatory classes were interviewed about these tests individually and in focus groups in fall 1998 in their junior or senior year of high school. Thirty-one seniors were interviewed individually, with the remaining 86 seniors and all 110 juniors interviewed in focus groups. Data were coded using NUD*IST, a computer program for qualitative data to determine patterns and categories in the students' knowledge and understanding of standardized tests. Four themes were identified: (1) information sources; (2) preparation; (3) students' test taking strategies; and (4) students' beliefs and anxieties regarding the tests' fairness. Findings show that overall, the African American and Latino students were very concerned about taking standardized admissions tests and scoring well enough to be admitted to the college of their choice. The students' strategy was usually taking any free or low-cost preparation assistance offered and taking the tests over and over. It is also clear that lack of information and lack of resources to pay for tests and test preparation and the pressure that students feel to perform well make standardized tests a barrier to college attendance for the African American and Latino students in this study. (Contains 42 references.) (SLD)

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Introduction

Taking the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and other college admissions exams has become a ritual of late adolescence across the United States. Students study for weeks and months leading up to the test, often availing themselves of preparation courses offered in school or commercially, and sometimes working with private SAT "coaches" (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki, 1997). Although always anxiety producing, in recent years the increased competition for admission to the country's top universities has magnified the importance of scoring well, resulting in heightened student and parent anxiety, growing media coverage of college admissions and new products and product advertising (McDonough, 1994).

African American and Latino high school students struggle with the anxiety of taking the SAT along with their White and Asian American peers, however African American and Latino students historically and currently score lower on standardized tests, including the SATs, than their peers (Hacker, 1992; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Crane, 1998; Hedges and Nowell, 1998). These lower test scores are a persistent barrier to pursuing postsecondary education for African American and Latino students (Hacker, 1992; Duran, 1994; Miller, 1995; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Bowen and Bok, 1998; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Vars and Bowen, 1998). As a result, African Americans and Latinos continue to lag considerably behind Whites and Asian Americans in college enrollment, academic achievement and degree attainment (Nettles, 1991; Carter and Wilson, 1996; Nettles and Perna, 1997; Freeman, 1997, 1999).

Policy and programmatic efforts, including affirmative action, have attempted to remedy this disparity with some success. Both African Americans and Latinos made strong gains due to these efforts. Affirmative action allows admissions officers to take an applicant's race or ethnicity into account when reviewing criteria, such as SAT scores, in deciding whom to admit. Currently, however, affirmative action has been banned in several states and is under attack in many more. While affirmative action helped reduce the impact of test score differentials, researchers have also attempted to understand how test score differences arise, in the hopes of eliminating them.

Researchers believe several structural issues including socioeconomic status (SES), poor quality schools, stereotype threat and cultural bias within the tests play a role in determining test scores (Hacker, 1992; Duran, 1994; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Crane, 1998; Hedges and Nowell, 1998; Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Steele and Brown, 1999; Spencer, Steele and Quinn, 1999). Although continuing efforts are being made to discern the reasons for the differential performance of African Americans and Latinos on standardized college admission tests, researchers have not focused on what these young test takers say and believe about the tests and their performance.

In response, this qualitative study focuses on African American and Latino high school students' perceptions of standardized admission tests, including the SAT, ACT and SAT II. Despite concern over the barrier test scores present for African American and Latino college aspirants, few researchers have asked students about these tests. This investigation includes the voices of 227 African American and Latino college bound high

school juniors and seniors speaking about standardized college admission tests. Findings include the students' lack of information about the test and their reliance on school officials for information, their preparation strategies, strategies for achieving high scores, students' stress level due to the necessity of high test scores and beliefs that the tests are an unfair obstacle.

Literature Review

African American and Latinos, on average, score lower on the SAT, ACT and SAT II exams required for entrance to many colleges, and researchers have investigated the causes of these differences. African American and Latino families are more likely to be low SES than are White or Asian Americans, and scholars estimate these differences explain one-third to two-thirds of the gaps in test scores (Kane, 1998; Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Crane, 1998; Hedges and Nowell, 1998).

The structures of the schools many African American and Latino students attend may also negatively affect test scores (Solorzano, 1992a, 1992b). African American and Latino students are more likely to attend schools that are resource poor, to be taught by less qualified teachers, to have teachers with lower expectations and to be tracked away from higher achieving groups (Oakes, 1985; Duran, 1994; Ferguson, 1998a, 1998b). The structure of college counseling in low SES schools, which many African Americans and Latinos attend, also may hinder test preparation because information regarding college requirements is distributed relatively late in the process (McDonough, 1997).

Furthermore, many scholars believe that African American and Latino students have lower scores on standardized tests due to cultural bias inherent in the tests (Hacker,

1992; Duran, 1994; Jencks, 1998). Researchers conclude that test questions, particularly on the SAT, are biased to favor white, middle to upper income students and fail to predict college performance for students of color to the extent that exams predict White students' performance (Hacker, 1992; Duran, 1994). Those results are disputed by psychometricians who believe that test questions are constructed and worded fairly (Freedle and Kostin, 1990; Scheuneman and Gerritz, 1990), and that lower scores for particular subgroups reflect an unequal access to educational resources (Haney, 1993).

Despite much research, overall test scores remain low. In a relatively new line of research, one reason for test score differences is believed to be stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1998). These researchers found that simply perceiving a testing situation as one which threatened to reinforce negative stereotypes regarding African American test performance was enough to lower the test scores of African Americans. This work was subsequently replicated with groups of women and men and with groups of White men and Asian American men on math tests (Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, Steele, and Brown 1999; Spencer, Steele and Quinn, 1999). Thus, test requirements become another obstacle for African American and Latino college aspirants because of society's negative expectations and beliefs regarding the abilities of these groups.

Test preparation courses are increasing in popularity as the belief has grown that test scores can be improved with practice and specialized knowledge. These courses have become increasingly popular among high-SES high school students as one way of gaining a competitive edge in the college admissions process (McDonough, 1997). Although test

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preparation companies claim that their courses can result in significant score increases, research done by Educational Testing Service disputes this claim (Powers, 1998; Powers and Rock, 1999). Powers (1998) found that students desire more low cost resources for test preparation, and that many high schools now offer some type of test preparation courses to students at no cost, although details regarding the type of program or the content were not available.

Freeman (1997) investigated African American college choice and believes students' perceptions of obstacles to attending college may hinder their participation. The students she interviewed perceived many obstacles including a lack of information, costs, and feeling intimidated. Freeman's study did not include information on students' feelings regarding standardized tests although many scholars believe such tests are an obstacle (Hacker, 1992; Duran, 1994; Miller, 1995; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Bowen and Bok, 1998; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Vars and Bowen, 1998).

Thus, African American and Latino students face a variety of hurdles in their quest to enroll in college, including standardized test scores. However, researchers have not explored African American and Latino students' knowledge of, perceptions regarding and strategies for taking standardized admissions tests such as the SAT. This qualitative study fills the gap in the research by reporting results from a study of 227 African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors.

Conceptual Framework

Bourdieu (1977) uses the concepts of cultural capital and habitus to explain the ways in which society structures opportunities and aspirations to reproduce the existing

social structure. In addition to economic capital, each social class possesses social and cultural capital, which parents pass to children as attitudes, preferences, and behaviors which are invested for social profits (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Also, people from the same social class often have common perceptions of strategies for attaining the social profits they desire, identified as a person's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, Antonio, Horvat, 1996; Horvat, 200?). Knowledge regarding the college choice process is a type of cultural capital and African American and Latino students possess less knowledge regarding college admissions than their White and Asian American peers (Horvat, 1995; McDonough, 1997). This lack of knowledge relative to their peers may put African American and Latino high school students at a disadvantage in the college choice process. Additionally, the habitus of African American and Latino students may lead them to utilize strategies that may not be successful in gaining access to the colleges or universities they desire.

This design explores African American and Latino high school students' cultural capital with respect to standardized tests as well as their test preparation strategies. Understanding their unique perspectives may provide further information for policymakers and educators seeking to raise African American and Latino students' test scores. Because so little is known about these groups of students' test taking knowledge, perceptions and strategies, this qualitative study examines these within the context of one post affirmative action state.

Method

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Qualitative methods, such as interviews, can provide insight into how individuals understand issues including standardized testing (Bogdan and Bicklen, 1992). Such methods also allow for the incorporation of underrepresented groups' perspectives and voices in research (McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993; Freeman, 1997, 1999). The interview data for this paper are drawn from a larger study of 227 African American and Latino high school juniors and seniors' college choice processes in three counties in Southern California. California is one of the states that in recent years banned affirmative action, and African American and Latino enrollment at the University of California campuses plummeted. The students interviewed for this study came from just three counties; however, Los Angeles, Riverside and Orange counties produce approximately half of all African American and Latino high school graduates in the state. A team of researchers, led by McDonough and including Walpole, asked students many questions regarding their college choices and decisions during the interviews. One question specifically asked students what they knew about standardized tests and how they received their information. It is the data from that specific question that were analyzed for this paper.

Students were interviewed individually and in focus groups in the Fall of 1998, their junior or senior year of high school. These students and schools met specific criteria for inclusion in the study. Eligible students were enrolled in college preparatory courses in their high schools at the time of the study. Three criteria were utilized to determine school eligibility: the school enrolled large percentages of underrepresented minorities; had high percentages of students taking the minimally necessary courses for admission to the

University of California (UC); and had low numbers of students eligible for admission at the UC, or low percentages of students of color eligible for admission at the UC.

Thirty-one seniors were interviewed individually with the remaining 86 seniors and all 110 juniors interviewed in focus groups. Interviewing some students individually allowed for a greater depth and understanding of the individual's process, while the focus groups increased access to students whose opinions and perceptions were important to the study. Interviews were taped and transcribed on an ongoing basis.

The data were coded using NUD*IST, a computer program for qualitative data and were reviewed by the entire team of researchers to allow patterns to emerge from the data. The patterns and categories in the students' knowledge and understanding of standardized tests included four themes. Those themes are issues of information sources, preparation, students' test taking strategies and students' beliefs and anxieties regarding the tests' fairness.

Results

Information sources

Many of these college bound students, including many seniors, lacked significant specific knowledge regarding the tests they were required to take, the scores actually required for admission and the time frame in which colleges required scores. One senior, when asked about the SAT, was a bit unsure about it. He told the interviewer the SAT "helps you to get into college... it depends on what percentage you get, right?... you have to do them, right?" Another student, who was in several Advanced Placement classes his senior year, did not know about the SAT until the Fall of his senior year when he

overheard his classmates discussing their scores. He said "they [asked] me 'Are you taking the SAT's?' and I said 'What's that?'… they already knew everything and had taken them four times... I asked one of the students 'What's the SAT?'" Another senior knew about the test, but was unsure of the time frame. She told the interviewer "all I know is you've got to take them. I'm not sure about when you need to."

Many of the juniors also recognized the importance of the tests, but some had even less information regarding the exams and timelines. One junior told the interviewer "they say you have to score big… [to] get in." When asked by the interviewer if she had taken any of the tests she replied "I think I have. I'm not really sure." Another junior, when asked about the tests, told an interviewer "I'm confused." A fourth said "I don't really know what [the test] is about."

Students also relied on school officials for knowledge about standardized tests and applying for college. When asked who they had talked to about the tests, very few students mentioned their parents. Counselors and teachers were mentioned most often, although several students mentioned outreach programs and older siblings that were already in college. One student said "the college counselor… tries to get it out there, [to] let the students know this is the deadline for the… SAT and you need to take this." Another student told the interviewer "our counselor [said] you need to prepare and study hard." A third student believed "my teachers push me, my math teacher… English… they all push us." Yet another student said "the 12th grade counselor… gives us the dates and the… registration deadline, fees and information about how to take the test."

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Older siblings also played a role. One student "heard, like a lot 'cause my sister took the SAT twice… she took all the tests… so I was like [okay]." One young Latina said "my sister's told me a lot about the SAT's, the scoring, knowing exactly where you stand… so… my sister mostly has told me." One young man who was a senior said he "talked to basically my teachers and my brother, and they said I should take it [the SAT]… cuz that's what a lot of colleges require."

Outreach programs, whether community based or state sponsored, similarly provided information to students. One student attended a state funded summer program "for like three days. They gave us seminars on what we need to know to get into the UC system." Another student who was a junior at the time of the interview attended a church based outreach program that "told us that to get into the UC, you have to take the SAT I and the SAT II." A local community college also had a program that one Latina attended "They were showing me how to enroll into a college… so that's when I knew that, you know, I needed pretty good classes to go to college."

Preparation

Once students understood that they needed to take the tests and knew which tests to take, the next hurdle was to prepare for the tests. Few of the students interviewed had access to private coaching or commercial preparation courses such as Princeton Review. One student explained she was not taking such a course because "It costs a lot really."

Many students, however, had access to preparation courses through their schools, their churches or outreach programs with area universities. One student explained that she "went to the SAT, ACT preparation workshop. It was here at school for two hours."

Another student said a preparation course was held "right here for free in [our] high school… that's an opportunity, so I came." A third student mentioned that a local community college had "this SAT prep class… anybody can come up there for free. They help them out." Some students also took classes through outreach programs such as Upward Bound or state funded programs. One such student said she had an outreach program course on the Saturday before the interview. Another student who took a preparation course sponsored by an outreach program said, "it was one Saturday and it was like for the whole day."

Other students studied on their own using preparation books they either purchased or borrowed. One student used a "workbook that actually helped… on the test." Another student got "books with different practice tests… so when you do take the test, you won't be surprised." A third said about preparing "I really have to like sit down and like study." A senior told the interviewer "I have two test books, so I just take the practice tests." Some students, however, continue to be disadvantaged by a lack of material resources even when trying to study on their own. One young woman mentioned that a friend had been able to use a CD-ROM to prepare but said "I don't own a computer so… this whole technology thing is like horrible for me."

Test Taking

Utilizing the resources available to them, most students prepared and then took the tests multiple times. They did this because they believed their standardized test scores needed to be higher than they were, and that their admission to desired colleges hinged, in part, on their test scores. Most students took the exam over and over, hoping

to raise their scores through familiarity, despite concerns about cost. One senior told the interviewer that she believed low scores "encourages us to take it as many times as possible… [so] that we can raise our scores." Another student who had taken the SAT twice already was planning "to take it at least two more times and build up my scores." A third said "they [school officials] basically tell us to take everything at least twice… one time to get a… feel for it."

This strategy of taking the test over and over meant that students had to find a way to pay for taking the tests multiple times. Several students believed tests should be free. One young woman said "they should offer at least one test for free." A male student told the interviewer: " It should be free all the tests… it costs a lot of money after you bill it up." Later in the same interview, a third student agreed with her male classmate saying "with all the college applications and those tests… if you're not running yourself broke, you're running your parents broke."

Many students, however, mentioned that fee waivers were available to them, reducing or eliminating the cost of the test. One student said "they have a fee waiver for… the SAT, so… you have to take it." Another student told the interviewer "at school we have a fee waiver." A third said the school counselor uses fee waivers as "little incentives for the students… that really pulls in a lot [of students]."

Issues of fairness and anxiety

Many American teenagers undoubtedly view the standardized tests required for college as difficult and unfair and are anxious about taking the tests and about achieving scores that are high enough. The African American and Latino high school students in this

study were no different. One student told the interviewer that "one test shouldn't really matter." Another student believed "it's not fair." A third student did not believe tests "should be… used to put people in college because… you could just be a bad test taker."

The issue of being a bad test taker came up many times. One young woman said "I'm not good at it, those types of tests, because… it's not nothing you can study for." A senior believed "some people are just not good at taking tests." A third student told the interviewer "I'm not a test person." Yet another said "some people aren't the greatest test takers."

Several students said they were afraid of the tests. One young man said he was "scared of tests… I get very, you know, scared." Another young man said "I get nervous testing, and I could study all week and just know everything, and then when it comes time for the test my palms get all sweaty and I forget everything." A young woman said she had taken a test preparation course, but that she was still "really scared" of taking the test.

Students said they knew the tests were difficult and that they needed high scores, and in many cases students desired extremely high scores. One student believed "they're all killer tests… I'm really gonna do bad on the math… I'm just avoiding the whole thing." A female senior said the tests have "pretty hard questions." An African American student said about the SAT: "you gotta study and it's hard." One student believed that to be accepted into a college, she needed a particular SAT score: "there is a certain cutoff… if you just don't have this score, you just can't get in." A female student told the interviewer she "heard… that if you get a score like better than 1100… that's good, but

they [colleges] want the really high scores." A young woman was concerned because she took the SAT and "got a 870, and that's just not decent to me, my goal is a 1300." A young man had similar aspirations: "For me, I've set… a 1300 SAT… whether or not this is fancy or reality… I should be able to score somewhere within the 12's… but I took my SATs in June and I got a 970."

Achieving scores that were "high enough" to get into college or to get into the college of their choice put a great deal of pressure on these students. One said "they [the tests] put too much pressure." Another believed that "it's too much stress on us already… it's not worth it." A third said the SAT made her "stress out" and that "it makes me feel incompetent sometimes." Yet another student found the tests "frustrating… you'd have a good day but then… when the day comes to an end, all you think about is the SAT scores and how you're gonna get into college. And so it's really hard. It's hard."

Students also generally understood that, as underrepresented minorities, they did not score well as a group on the SAT or ACT. One senior believed "the SAT is racially biased or ethnically or… culturally biased." A junior also believed tests are "biased to minorities." A young woman recognized that "statistically we score lower. We being a minority score lower on SATs." Several students believed the ACT was a better test for them to take as students of color. One said "I've heard that the ACT is supposed to be the same test but minorities score higher on it." A senior said she heard the ACT is "easier for African Americans… that's what they say." Finally one senior tied test scores, college admissions and affirmative action together. She was not satisfied with her

test scores saying "I did bad… but I'm gonna practice and try and do the best that I can." Although she wanted to be admitted into a selective university she said "if I don't, there's always junior college… it's just hard now… because we don't have affirmative action."

Discussion/ Implications

So overall, these African American and Latino high school students were very concerned about taking standardized admission tests and scoring well enough to be admitted to the college of their choice. Students felt a great deal of pressure, some felt the tests were unjust and were not hopeful about their chances of scoring well. Despite the perceived impediments, many students tried to take the tests and score well because college attendance was so important. Their strategy for taking the tests involved availing themselves of whatever free or low cost preparation assistance was offered and taking the tests over and over again.

This strategy constitutes an element in the students' habitus. Although familiarizing themselves with the tests by taking it repeatedly may help increase scores, score increases may also result from a more in depth knowledge of the material. Test preparation courses may assist in promoting that knowledge, but many of the courses students mentioned were several hours long or were held on one Saturday. It is doubtful that a significant amount of learning or retention occurs after such a short period of time. Although it makes sense that students choose this option, it may not benefit them as much as an extended in depth program could. In this way, then, students' habitus and the resources available to them are leading them to utilize a strategy that may be less successful than students desire. Many students, however, lacked the resources for or

information on other preparation strategies, in addition to lacking information on standardized tests in general and relied on school personnel to provide it.

It is no surprise that the African American and Latino students in this study needed more information on the tests because past research has found that these groups of high school students lack the specific knowledge necessary to successfully enroll in a college or university, which would include knowledge about tests (Horvat, 1995). This knowledge is a form of cultural capital to which students from high socioeconomic families have greater access (Horvat, 1995; McDonough, 1997). Since African American and Latino high school students are disproportionately from low SES families, they often lack this particular cultural capital and are disadvantaged in the test taking and college going processes. In Bourdieuian terms, then, knowledge regarding standardized tests is a form of cultural capital, and although prior research has shown that knowledge of the college admission process was a form of cultural capital (Horvat, 1995; McDonough, Antonio, and Horvat, 1996; McDonough, 1997), specific knowledge regarding standardized tests was not included previously.

Furthermore, it is clear that this lack of information along with the lack of resources to pay for tests and test preparation and the pressure these students feel to perform well results in standardized test requirements acting as a barrier to college attendance for the African American and Latino students in this study. Results from Freeman's (1997) investigation illustrated some of the obstacles African American students perceive when considering college. Although her interviewees did not address standardized tests, Freeman believes students' perceptions of obstacles may hinder their

participation. It is clear from this study that students do perceive the tests as obstacles, and those perceptions may, in turn, hinder their participation.

Students' perceptions of the tests as unfair, particularly for underrepresented students of color, also has implications for the new line of research on stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997; Steele and Aronson, 1998). Several students, without being asked specifically, said they had heard or believed the tests were biased and that they would not score as well as their peers because they were African American or Latino. This is exactly the type of internalized stereotype that researchers believe results in lower test scores. Furthermore, although psychometric research shows that test questions are not biased (Freedle and Kostin, 1990; Scheuneman and Gerritz, 1990), students believe the tests are unfair, and that perception can shape how students respond to the tests.

Further Research

Many students of all races and ethnicities are undoubtedly concerned and feel pressured by test requirements, and some may feel the tests are unfair. In this regard, the African American and Latino students in this study may not differ radically from their White or Asian American peers. However, the perceptions of the students in this study are critical because, as a group, their scores jeopardize their participation in higher education (Hacker, 1992; Duran, 1994; Miller, 1995; Steele and Aronson, 1995; Bowen and Bok, 1998; Jencks and Phillips, 1998; Kane, 1998; Vars and Bowen, 1998). In 2000, African Americans scored 65 points lower than Asian Americans and 94 points lower than Whites on the verbal portion of the SAT. The differences on the Math portion were

139 points and 104 points respectively. Latinos scored an average of 456 on the SAT verbal portion, 43 points lower than Asian Americans and 72 points lower than Whites, and 459 on the SAT math portion, 106 points lower than Asian Americans and 71 points lower than Whites (The College Board, 2001). These two groups also have the lowest rates of college attendance and degree completion (Nettles, 1991; Carter and Wilson, 1996; Nettles and Perna, 1997; Freeman, 1997, 1999).

Although researchers have tried to change this situation, the differences in test scores and participation rates have remained. Perhaps gaining insight into the students' perspectives will enable educators and researchers to raise test scores for African Americans and Latinos and increase their college attendance and graduation rates. The results presented here have implications for researchers, practitioners and policymakers. For practitioners and policymakers, it is clear that these students need more and clearer information regarding what tests to take and when to take them as well as more in depth preparation. Since students clearly perceive these tests as barriers, and since those perceptions may limit their participation, policymakers also need to question the use of standardized tests in the admissions process. While testing requirements remain, timely, in depth preparation may assist these students in raising their scores.

Researchers may want to investigate the breadth and depth of the free or low cost in school preparation many students in the study mentioned, particularly given Powers (1998) finding that many high schools are offering test preparation courses at no cost. Low SES students and students of color often do not have access to a high quality K-12 education (Oakes, 1985; Solarzano, 1992a, 1992b; Duran, 1994; McDonough, 1997;

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Ferguson, 1998a, 1998b), which increases the importance of high quality, in depth test preparation. A comparison with the preparation that other groups of students receive, including White and Asian American students in higher SES schools, may illuminate further equity issues. Research could also investigate the effectiveness of different information sources, such as church based organizations and outreach programs for students. Additional research on other elements of habitus or cultural capital may be fruitful as well.

Understanding how these students of color gather information about the tests, view the tests and how they prepare provides insight that may ultimately assist in raising their scores. Raising the test scores of African American and Latino high school students can lead to greater representation at many of our nation's campuses, a critical endeavor particularly given the current attacks on affirmative action.

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